

The raising of America: Early childhood and the future of our nation ^[1]

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Source: raisingofamerica.org

Format: Video

Publication Date: 10 Jun 2015

AVAILABILITY

[Project website](#) ^[2]

[Series preview](#) ^[3]

About the Raising of America project

The Raising of America grew directly out of California Newsreel's four-hour PBS series, *Unnatural causes: Is inequality making us sick* which explores the root causes of our alarming class and racial inequities in health. The series won Best Science Film/Radio/TV program of 2009 by the National Academies, a duPont-Columbia Award (considered the Pulitzers of broadcast journalism), among other prestigious honors.

After the 2008 national PBS broadcast, *Unnatural causes* was shown in more than 25,000 community dialogs, policy forums, trainings, classrooms, town hall meetings and other venues in those first 18 months as a tool to foster dialogue and action toward health equity.

With growing scientific evidence revealing how experiences in the first years of life build the foundation for life-long physical, emotional and cognitive health, many users of *Unnatural causes* urged us in surveys, conversations and emails that our next project scrutinize the "social ecology," or web of relations and policies, that affect parents and caregivers and shape so much of early child health and development and consequently, life-course outcomes. The early years are a time when public policy interventions and grassroots efforts can have the greatest benefits and many experts link investments in maternal health and early child development as critical to building a healthier, safer, happier, more equitable and more prosperous nation.

The studies are many, they are strong and they are persuasive. Yet little or no popular media have translated these scientific findings into a compelling new narrative capable of changing the way parents, practitioners, policy makers and the public think about society's responsibilities and interest in these first crucial years. The conventional default explanations of child development—"good" vs. "bad" parents, genetics and cultural dysfunction—still predominate. Perhaps not coincidentally, little progress has been made in improving outcomes for America's children.

We need a new story, these *Unnatural causes* users suggested, a story that translates the science into popular terms, a story that ruptures the 'family bubble' discourse and widens the locus of debate from the individual child and family to the larger social ecology that structures opportunities for healthy child development, a story that connects early child development to America's future health and prosperity, and most of all a story the impels a sense of urgency and engages the public imagination for bold, transformational changes which can make a nurturing childhood ecology the birthright of every child in America, the most prudent investment any nation can make.

The Raising of America in three parts

A documentary series that explores how a strong start for all our kids can lead to a healthier, safer, better educated and more prosperous and equitable America.

A national public engagement campaign to reframe the debate about what we as a society can—and should—do to ensure a strong start for every infant.

A companion website with video clips, interactives, discussion guides, action guides, resources and more.

About the documentary series

The raising of America signature hour: *Early childhood and the future of our nation* ^[3]

The U.S. is a can-do nation. So why is child well-being in the U.S. so much worse than in other rich countries? How does what Paul Kershaw calls "the growing squeeze" on so many young families and caregivers—the squeeze for time, for money and for resources—"drip down" on their infants and young children, literally altering the wiring of their developing brains with potential long-term consequences for learning, earning and mental and physical health? How might we do better?

This hour-long episode interweaves the latest discoveries from neuroscience with the stories of families and communities struggling to provide the nurturing environments all babies and young children need to thrive—while too often hindered by social conditions that put their children on low developmental trajectories. It doesn't have to be this way. If the nation aspires to a healthier, safer, better educated, more prosperous and equitable future, we must find a way to enable all our children the opportunity for a strong start now.

Once upon a time: When childcare for all wasn't just a fairytale ^[4]

Just imagine how things might be different if, for the past four decades, all American children had access to high-quality early care and ed. It almost happened. Back in 1971, Congress passed a bill providing high-quality, universal childcare, home visiting and other services from birth to age five to every family that wanted it. President Nixon's 11th hour veto marked the first time "family values" was invoked to undermine pro-family and child initiatives. The veto marked a critical inflection point from our path towards a more inclusive nation to today's "you're-on-your-own" society.

Are we crazy about our kids? ^[5]

Investing in high-quality early care and education pays for itself in many ways and many times over. This episode brings to life the classic economic studies of Perry Preschool and other initiatives conducted by Nobel laureate James Heckman, former Federal Reserve economist Arthur Rolnick and others which illustrate how we can either invest early for success or pay more for failure later. So, what is holding us back?

Wounded places: Confronting childhood PTSD in America's shell-shocked cities ^[6]

Too many children in America, especially children of color in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, are exposed to adversity, violence, neglect and other forms of trauma and show symptoms similar to PTSD—except there is no "post." Traveling to Philadelphia and Oakland, this episode chronicles the stories of children shook by violence and adversity and asks not "What's wrong with you?" but "What happened to you?" and how can traumatized children and neighborhoods heal.

DNA is not destiny (episode in development)

New scientific discoveries reveal how fetal and early childhood environments quite literally change brain architecture and other bio-regulatory systems—from the stress response to metabolism. Early environments—be they chemical or socioeconomic—can alter not the genes babies inherit but the epigenetic "volume controls" which turn genes on and off. These epigenetic switches can influence the self-regulation of emotions and behaviors, cognitive function, even the susceptibility to chronic diseases as people age.

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